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ABSTRACT

This Digest advocates alternative educational programs as ways to reduce dropout rates, increase academic and personal satisfaction and achievement, provide real options for struggling students, and generate improvement in all grade levels. The study discusses five concerns in relation to alternative school programs: (1) issues raised regarding choice options within and outside the public school system; (2) characteristics of public school alternative programs; (3) examples of educational options; (4) the implementation and management of alternative school programs within school districts; and, (5) the potential challenges for schools in the adoption of programs of choice. The Digest concludes by expressing the need for adequate planning in order to make alternative school programs practical, feasible, and mutually beneficial. (JAM)

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By Amy Klauke

It is perhaps inevitable that a society based on individual freedom will have to contend with the pressure for broader choices in education. Participants and researchers are discovering that alternative educational programs generally reduce dropout rates, increase academic and personal satisfaction and achievement, provide real options for struggling students, and generate improvement on all levels in the schools.

What issues are raised regarding choice options within and outside the public school system?

Two basic types of programs could potentially receive governmental funding: those in which families choose among various options within a public school or district, and those in which vouchers are used. A voucher system would award students the equivalent of their tax dollars to be applied toward tuition at a public or private school of their choice. School districts fear that the voucher system would siphon funds and students away from the public schools and into the private realm; the result could be heightened racial and class segregation.

"To assign parents full and unfettered responsibility for choosing their children's education in an open market," argues Mary Anne Raywid (1987), "is to telegraph the message that the matter is solely their affair and not the community's concern." Raywid contends that the perception of education as a public, as well as a private, good is crucial to the survival of public education. She warns that, as has happened in France, a voucher system could create a situation where private schools serve the affluent and public schools serve the poor. Lobbyists and special interest groups would then establish themselves around the private schools, thus making the voucher system impossible to reverse.

Keeping choice within the boundaries of the public school system, Raywid says, is the best way to preserve the democratic structure of education. Although different in form, options could be assured of offering an equivalent quality of education, maintaining class and ethnic balance, and providing a standardized, measurable knowledge base for all students.

What are some characteristics of public alternative programs?

Alternative school programs, Raywid tells us, consist of a distinct administrative unit, voluntary student and staff participation, responsiveness to particular needs or interests not served in the public core school, a structural design strongly influenced or established by local constituents, and a developmental format that encourages a broad range of student personal and academic skills.

In alternative programs, power tends to be more evenly distributed among students, teachers, and administrators. Curriculum is characterized by independent study and experiential learning. Many alternative programs offer greater autonomy, especially the freedom to withdraw from the program, which creates a relaxed, congenial environment and gives students a sense of control over and responsibility for their learning.

Such programs often encourage the development of humanistic values, decision-making skills, and self-awareness. The emphasis is usually on realizing individual potential rather than comparing individual achievement to group norms.

What are some examples of educational options?

Alternative schools may differ from regular schools in their attendance policies, curriculum, size, materials, methods, location, organization, and/or regulations. Magnet schools, for example, are often organized around a theme, with all subjects revolving in relation to the core emphasis. A West Virginia school district, according to H. Lawrence Jones and Henry Marockie (1987), has initiated an open enrollment policy that allows parents to select the school within the district that best serves their children's needs. Brought together by common goals, constituents then work on developing an appropriate curriculum.

The self-directed learning and flexible attendance policies of Vancouver's Alternative Learning Center, according to Robert Fizzell (1987), allow students to work at their own pace and have changed the role of teacher from knowledge giver and enforcer to facilitator and counselor.

How can educators implement and manage programs of choice within their district?

Richard Elmore (1986) says policy-makers need to develop flexibility in determining aspects of finance, attendance, staff selection, and curriculum content. Alternative programs must serve both broad and individual goals, providing a measurable basic education within their autonomous structures. For

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example, policy-makers could, Elmore says, establish minimum standards in the areas of student-staff ratio, staff qualifications, study hours, performance expectations, and racial and economic balance. Fizzell recommends each alternative school provide the community with extensive information on its characteristics, screen applicants for compatibility, and thoroughly orient new members to the programs they select.

Charles Glenn (1988) suggests the following steps for implementation of alternative programs:

- conduct initial and ongoing parent surveys regarding teaching/learning styles, school climate, supplemental programs, content, character development, and willingness to commute; then use this information to design and improve programs
- provide adequate staff involvement and development
- make a commitment to parent outreach
- establish a fair, simple process for school assignment and appeals
- manage the impact on individual schools
- organize a transportation system

In addition, Joe Nathan (1988) advises listing skills and knowledge all students will be expected to acquire; making development funds available to teachers; establishing effective communication with parents; providing transportation, especially for low-income families; and ensuring that transfers and assignments do not discriminate on the basis of race, economic level, past behavior, academic achievement, or parental pressure.

What potential challenges may arise as schools adopt programs of choice?

Opening the door to choice within the public school system promises to raise certain questions. Policy-makers, Nathan asserts, will need to closely monitor ethnic, sexual, and economic balances, as well as prevent the exclusive selection of high-performing students.

Fizzell warns that "students' study skills and background knowledge are weaker today than in the past, which makes independent study difficult for them. Their interests are immediate and practical; their concerns, narrow and personal." Similarly, Saul Cooperman (1988) cautions that economic pressure may make it difficult for parents to "make informed decisions or participate in the school." Also, increased funds may be needed to provide teacher training, transportation, discourse with the community, and coordination of the multiple programs.

Still, adequate planning, most educators seem to agree, can make program selection a practical, feasible, and mutually beneficial option for the public school system.

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